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OCTOBER 24, 1977

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DOLE: PANAMANIAN PLEBISCITE WON'T AFFECT SENATE ACTION

SENATOR BOB DOLE said today that he doubted the Panamanian plebiscite on the Panama Canal Treaties would have any effect on Senate consideration of the proposals. "I don't know of any Member of the United States Senate who has been awaiting the Panamanian 'mandate' to announce his own position on the Treaties," Dole noted.

Senator Dole said he suspected that many of the "yes" ballots cast in Sunday's Panamanian plebiscite were directed more "against the 1903 Treaty rather than for the 1977 Treaties." He based this conjecture on the Torrijos government's method of promoting the Treaties, and on media reports that the Panamanian rank-and-file are not really familiar with the specific provisions of the pacts.

"The United States Senate has the advantage of being able to scrutinize these documents for specific defects and omissions. Unlike the Panamanian people, the Senate can do much more than simply cast a 'yes' or 'no' vote on behalf of the American people," Dole said. "We should exercise this right to modify Treaty language where necessary, and to attach conditions of ratification where useful, in order to have the best possible product before us when a final ratification vote is taken. Then, perhaps the Panamanian people will be given a chance to vote a second time on Treaties with clearer and more specific protections for both Panama and United States interests."

Senator Dole has already introduced a series of Amendments and Reservations to clarify selected portions of the proposed Treaties, including U.S. defense and passage rights through the Canal.

Treaty Legitimacy Questioned

In a related vein, Senator Dole pointed out that the 1972 Panamanian Constitution, enacted by the Torrijos regime, gives the President of Panama the sole authority "to conduct foreign relations .... and to enter into international treaties and agreements ..." "Because of this provision, Dole said, Panamanian President Demetrio Lakas should have signed the Treaties on September 7, rather than General Torrijos, who is Commander in Chief of the National Guard. "It could be suggested that this nullifies the legitimacy of the Treaties and, consequently, the legitimacy of the plebiscite itself," Dole noted. "This is just one more reason why the plebiscite can be viewed as something of a pretense."